

Guest editorial: Higher education research of master students: nurturing their development, hearing their voices, and promoting their expectations

Higher education research is firmly establishing itself as a significant and maturing field within the social sciences globally (Tight, 2023). Asian-based researchers are increasingly contributing to the global knowledge pool in this area, with notable advancements in understanding key issues such as teaching and learning, policy, governance, management, mobility and internationalisation and student and academic affairs (e.g. Can and Hou, 2021). An analysis of articles published in leading higher education journals made by the authors of this editorial reveals that the contribution of Asian-affiliated authors has risen from 7% in 2001 to 30% in 2025. Additionally, in well-established international higher education conferences, such as those organised by the Consortium of Higher Education Researchers (CHER), the representation of Asian researchers is growing, fostering increased idea exchange and collaboration among higher education researchers from Asia, Europe and North America (see Horta, 2022). This trend marks a rapid transformation from the early 21st century when the contribution of Asian-affiliated researchers to international higher education literature was largely nascent and fragmented, with limited communication between those focused on teaching and learning and those on policy and management (Jung and Horta, 2013; Horta and Jung, 2014; Kim *et al.*, 2017). Today, partly due to public policy incentives for international publication, Asian contributions are more visible, offering perspectives that connect local and national developments with global transformations and challenges. This dynamic also highlights the tension between indigenous and national theories and the dominant global discourses and methodological preferences (Oldac *et al.*, 2024).

The growing interest among academics and researchers in higher education studies in Asian countries is closely linked to the rapid evolution of their higher education systems (Kim *et al.*, 2017). This evolution is notable not only for the increasing number of institutions and broader access to higher education but also for the significant advancements in academic research. Asia now accounts for a substantial proportion of global higher education enrolments, and the rise of Asian universities, especially those in East Asia, in global rankings has been remarkable (Marginson, 2022a). Higher education systems in Asia are increasingly seen as competitors to traditional centres in North America and Europe, contributing to a multi-centred and highly networked global higher education landscape (Marginson, 2022b). However, despite this rapid progress, several challenges typical of massifying higher education systems remain largely unresolved in the region, much like elsewhere. These challenges include governance, access and equity, internationalisation, quality of education and learning, privatisation, accreditation and quality assurance (Hou *et al.*, 2024; Shin and



Harman, 2009). Additionally, technological developments, such as AI and blockchain, present both threats and opportunities, requiring a revamp of teaching, research, administrative and managerial processes (Horta, 2023). These issues are relevant both for countries that have rapidly massified their higher education systems (mostly in East Asia) and for those still in the process of massification (primarily in Southeast Asia and South Asia). In the most socio-economically advanced economies in Asia, such as the Republic of Korea, Japan, Taiwan and Hong Kong, higher education systems have entered a post-massification phase, facing new challenges. These challenges are closely tied to broader societal and economic issues, including ageing populations, which imply a decreasing number of potential students (Yonezawa, 2023) and financial constraints that limit investment in the higher education sector (Horta, 2023). These factors may lead to the closure of universities, faculties, or departments, with varying impacts across institutions but substantial overall effects on both the higher education sector and local and national economies (Jung, 2024). These are topics likely to receive increasing research interest in the future since the challenges and changes to be faced by higher education systems are bound to impact not only higher education systems, institutions and countries, but also those that are considering entering higher education as students, researchers and/or academics (such as Ph.D. students that are already facing constrained labour market conditions and prospects; see Liu and Li, 2024).

These topics appeal to both seasoned higher education researchers and newcomers to the field. In this context, it is crucial to address the interests and concerns of emerging researchers, as they represent the future of higher education research. Encouraging and nurturing new researchers is essential, but it is equally important to provide them with opportunities to have their voices heard through their studies and research careers. This special issue offers a unique platform for very early-career researchers in higher education to share their voices. The featured authors are students from the Master of Education programme at the University of Hong Kong, specialising in higher education (M.Ed.-H.E.). The featured programme was initiated in 2010 to prepare professionals in the local higher education sector and to train future researchers in the field. The dynamic learning environment of the programme, characterised by research and practical applications in higher education, attracted numerous students from both local and international spheres. These individuals engaged in a wide array of research endeavours (Oleksiyenko, 2017). This special issue is based on the students' independent research projects from the programme. Their publications, based on rigorous research and subjected to independent peer review, highlight their interests and concerns regarding higher education. The special issue also provides the students with the valuable experience of submitting their work to an international journal and engaging in the dialogue between authors, reviewers and editors that contributes to knowledge construction. This experience is invaluable for them to learn about the publication process, make their research accessible to others and understand the importance of peer review and intellectual interactions with peers from an early stage in their careers.

Various research topics that young researchers have prioritised as emerging issues were presented in the special issue. Some topics are related to teaching and learning practices in the classroom, while others focus on student experiences across disciplines and institutions. Additionally, some topics concentrate on newly developed programmes and their policy implications. As expected, the authors' research contexts primarily cover Hong Kong and Mainland China, with findings that are theoretically and practically applicable to a broader higher education context.

Two articles in the special issue particularly focus on the assessment and feedback practices in higher education. For example, Yau Liu's article "A case study of Chinese master's students' perceptions of supervisors' use of evaluative language in feedback" explores how today's students perceive their supervisors' feedback language from both cognitive and affective perspectives (Liu, 2025). While students view directive, actionable and evaluative language as effective for the assessment, they experience mixed emotions and negative feelings due to inadequate follow-up explanations from the teachers. Students also perceive

power imbalances between supervisors and students, which hinders active student participation in feedback processes. These findings raise several discussion points on the latest emphasis on students as patterns and interactive feedback in higher education learning contexts.

Xinzi Ow Yong's study on "Perceptions of 'going gradeless': a case study of a master's programme in the education field" also addresses the issue of assessment in today's higher education (Ow Yong, 2025). The author criticises heavy grade-driven approaches and students' excessive competition for higher grades, introducing the recent movement in higher education towards implementing a gradeless system. The author compares academics' and students' perspectives on changes in the grading system at the master's level. Interestingly, academics tend to share a critical view of the current grading system and recognise the value of a gradeless system, while more students are resistant to a system without grades as they perceive grades as personal advantages that recognise their hard work and abilities, differentiating them from their peers.

Student mobility was one of the most significant topics covered in the special issue. Renjie Cai's work on "Migration intentions of mainland Chinese students pursuing higher education in Hong Kong" sheds light on the recent trend of student mobility between Hong Kong and Mainland China (Cai, 2025). There is a growing trend in the region where many students from Mainland China come to Hong Kong for further study with the long-term intention of immigration as part of their life plans. This trend has been intensified by the Hong Kong government's visa policies to attract non-local talents. The author identified this social issue as a research problem and investigated how Mainland students' migration intentions manifest in the region's dynamic economic and social landscapes. The findings highlight the complexity of students' migration decisions, showing their inclination towards residing in first-tier cities across the region. They consistently evaluate job opportunities and working conditions to enhance their career and life prospects in the region. The Chinese concept of "Chaxugeju" was employed to elucidate the decision-making process, illustrating China's distinctive social structure and emphasising individuals' connections within the family and society.

Huaqing He's article on "Chinese students' selection of cross-border cooperative universities for tertiary education: intrinsic and extrinsic motivations" focused on the increasing number of students in bachelor's degree programs at cross-border cooperative universities (CBCUs) in the mainland (He, 2025). The study explores the primary motivations of students choosing these institutions, highlighting their desire for new experiences and quality educational resources. Interestingly, many students choose these institutions due to constraints from Gaokao scores and uncertainties from the National College Entrance Examination system. By applying the self-determination theory, the author demonstrates how individual and institutional factors interact in students' decision-making processes and what universities can do to attract and retain students by better understanding their backgrounds and motivations.

Hanwei Jin's study, "A comparative study of the academic experiences between local and non-local community college students in Hong Kong", also focuses on non-local students in Hong Kong (Jin, 2025). In the article, the author explores how the academic experiences of local and non-local students differ in community colleges, which are significantly different from public four-year universities. Based on Bourdieu's cultural capital theory, the author reveals non-local students' academic challenges and the significant disparities in academic achievement between local and non-local community college students. The findings underscore the need for targeted interventions to address these disparities and enhance the inclusion and diversity of higher education.

Other articles in the special issue focused on policy issues related to developing professional programmes in emerging areas of industrial demand. Tim Cheng's study, "The impact of professional education programs on career development", presented a case study illustrating how the increasing number of professional degree programs aligns with the evolving labour market (Cheng, 2025). The study revealed how universities strategically introduce and enhance

new professional programmes and how students leverage their learning experiences for professional growth. They tend to positively perceive the programme curricula, industry partnerships and networking opportunities in the professional degree programmes, although there are operational challenges to these programmes.

Sin Yi Lam's article, "Policy analysis of vocational training with the advocacy coalition framework: a case study on Hong Kong dental care profession", illustrates the dynamics between government policy and the higher education sector's response in supplying and training specific professions (Lam, 2025). Based on the case study of Hong Kong dental auxiliary personnel training, the author explored how vocational training can respond to the diversifying economy and the need for a skilled workforce. The findings specifically highlight the challenges faced by programmes and institutions in addressing skills gaps through workforce training, higher education curriculum and meeting the needs of the workforce.

The diverse topics and methodologies of the published articles in this special issue reaffirm the need for further research and researcher training in the field of higher education, especially in the region's rapidly changing higher education context. We hope that this contribution provides a platform for master's-level researchers to share their research initiatives and bring fresh perspectives to the research field.

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